

Canada's pot debate should wait and learn from Colorado: Expert

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Marijuana buds are packaged for sale at the Botanacare marijuana store ahead of their grand opening on New Year's Day in Northglenn, Colorado, December 31, 2013. (REUTERS/Rick Wilking)

TORONTO - Canadian policy-makers should keep a close eye on the recent legalizing of marijuana in two U.S. states before deciding on a direction in the pot debate now raging north of the border, a prominent American drug-policy expert says.

Mark Kleiman, a professor with the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) and an adviser to Washington State on the recent loosening of its pot laws, says it will be to Canada's "advantage" to take note of how Washington and Colorado deal with the legalization of marijuana — a recreational drug many consider to be potentially addictive and a health

hazard — and to take note of the successes and the challenges experienced by both states.

“What happens in Colorado and Washington will teach us something about the effects of legal cannabis markets,” Kleiman told the Toronto Sun. “That new knowledge should help Canada — or whoever wants to go next — design a better system. For the (early) adopters of legalization, the key is to pick a system that is easily changed in the light of experience.”

In 2012, Washington and Colorado each made a landmark departure from stalwart American drug laws by legalizing recreational marijuana, with Colorado last Wednesday becoming the first state to officially begin allowing the sale and purchase of the drug at commercial locations.

That day, as many as 40 dispensaries licensed to sell marijuana opened, and anyone aged 21 and older is now free to buy a limited amount. State-mandated rules around the sale reportedly include childproof packaging and labelling that has licence numbers of the producer of the drug, as well as the retailer selling it. It will reportedly be next year sometime when Washington will begin a similar practice.

As well, it was deemed legal for Colorado citizens to grow up to six plants in their homes for their own use without the fear of criminal persecution that has long existed throughout the U.S.

Meanwhile, debate over legalizing pot here in Canada was ignited yet again after federal Liberal Leader Justin Trudeau admitted during a trip to Vancouver this past summer that he had smoked pot after being elected an MP, and called for marijuana to be made legal north of the border.

For a time afterward, Conservative MP and Justice Minister Peter MacKay maintained the ruling Tories have “no intention of legalizing or decriminalizing marijuana.” But, in December, MacKay hinted the Conservatives are considering altering the nation’s marijuana laws so police would have the option of fining pot smokers in possession of small amounts of the drug instead of laying criminal charges.

What is currently happening in Washington and Colorado, the UCLA’s Kleiman says, is an experiment in what good could come of legalizing marijuana — a controlled and reversible experiment of sorts that could either result in “gains” such as reduced illicit activity, fewer arrests and a

decrease in incarceration, or possible “losses” such as increased drug abuse and a rise in impaired driving.

Kleiman also said that while both Washington and Colorado have left the selling of the pot up to their respective commercial markets — both of which must do so under state-made rules and regulations — this may not be the way to go for Canada, explaining that if marijuana is made legal north of the border, the safe selling of it may best be done by government.

“If an addictive commodity is to be provided, the provider ought to be someone who doesn’t have a financial incentive to induce consumers to use it addictively,” he said. “That is the case for either not-for-profit suppliers or a state monopoly. The notion that the state should keep its own hands clean by what is sure to be ineffective regulation rather than becoming a direct provider makes no sense (whatsoever) to me.”

Dr. Jurgen Rehm, of Toronto’s Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, says CAMH is considering supporting the legalization of pot in Canada as long as strict conditions are put in place around its advertising and marketing, as well as strong safeguards around keeping it out of the hands of minors.

CAMH, which currently only supports the decriminalization of marijuana, has been watching marijuana reforms around the world, Rehm said, and will continue to keep an eye on the happenings in Colorado and Washington State.

“We are currently in the process of reviewing our position,” he said. “We are looking actively into the far-reaching reforms that have happened around the world. We are looking into under what environmental circumstances legalization should be recommended ... It has to be under very controlled circumstances. There are a number of clear conditions under which any kind of legalization has to fall in order to make sense.”

According to an August 2013 poll by Forum Research Inc., 69% of adult Canadians support either the legalization and taxation of marijuana or the decriminalization for small amounts of the drug.